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IDEAS

Is academic
freedom hurt by
secret research?

By Robert C. Cowen

There was an air of mystery about the United States' great research universities during World War II. Pistol-packing guards barred corridors and buildings whose restricted access suggested knowledge known only to a privileged few. Even the most daring of student pranksters left those areas alone. The guards meant business, and whatever the university was up to was no business of yours.

It's a scene those universities don't want to see again, however proud their contribution to the war effort. Indeed, they generally prohibit classified research on campus. Yet, for those with long memories, it forms a background

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flow of scientific and technical information.

Thus, when Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle recently asked Stanford University president Donald Kennedy if the university's ban on secret research is not itself an infringement of academic freedom, Kennedy had a ready answer. He explained that Stanford prohibits such work on campus because it would interfere with the life of the university as a community of scholars and inhibit education by restricting free discussion.

Wartime secrecy ruined the free interchange of information and clash of ideas among students and faculty members. It suspended the equal access to knowledge, which is the essence — literally the collegiality — of university life. Perle had no such wholesale limitation in mind. But, as Kennedy noted, once secrecy returns to the campus, however limited its scope, no one knows how it might spread.

It's a live issue. The Department of Defense (DOD), as Perle noted, would

like to place some classified research with universities. This, for example, could extend the scope of work to be done by a nine-university consortium with which the Pentagon is negotiating to develop basic technology for the "star wars" space defense program.

Kennedy and Perle were part of a panel that briefed news reporters on the control of scientific information. The other two panelists were William Perry, former undersecretary of defense for research and engineering, and Adm. Bobby Inman (ret.), former director of the National Security Agency (NSA). The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), Association of American Universities, and Scientists' Institute for Public Information held the briefing.

The main topic was concern over the use of export controls to restrict publication of research or its presentation at professional meetings. This has been done with government and industry research in defense-related areas, even when the research itself is nonsecret.

There has been little such restriction of university research. But the academic community worries about it.

At the moment, however, there seems little threat of any determined effort to use export controls to restrict university freedom. The Defense Department denies any such intention. It would be prohibited from doing so by the language of the four-year extension of the Export Administration Act. Indeed, there was general agreement among the panelists that academic freedom should be preserved.

But when some faculty members are themselves tempted to take the bait of classified DOD research contracts, there could be problems. Inman, who has been visiting campuses throughout the US, said he has found the desire to take such contracts to be fairly widespread. Pentagon dollars are attractive. And some university scientists and engineers want to have the freedom to help meet what they consider an important national need without being forced to go off campus to do so.

Kennedy rightly pointed out that it is the larger freedom of the university that is at stake. Were such secret projects allowed on campuses, some professors would again have privileged access to university-developed knowledge. They could not discuss it with colleagues. They could

not use it in teaching. Graduate students who worked on their projects would be denied the stimulus of talking over their thesis work with fellow students.

Meanwhile, Werner A. Baum of Florida State University is to receive the AAAS Scientific Freedom and Responsibility Award next week for having faced down the Department of Commerce and the NSA on a secrecy issue seven years ago. Baum, who was then chancellor of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, balked at an attempt to slap a secrecy order on an encryption device invented at FSU. The agencies backed off. The order was withdrawn. And Baum helped develop a policy of voluntary review for "sensitive" scholarly papers on cryptology — a policy that preserved academic freedom.

It is unlikely that there will be a need for such standoffs over the next few years. But the tension between academic freedom and national security could tighten as more DOD-funded research is done on campus. What is needed now is a national consensus, especially within the academic community, on the proper role for the university in defense-related work.

A Tuesday column. Robert C. Cowen is the Monitor's natural science editor.

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